Factors Influencing E-Portfolio Use and Students’ Approaches to Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze the factors influencing eportfolio use in higher education and its implication on students’ learning. These relationships are investigated under different stimulated conditions that have offered the potential for more understanding of the influencing factors in the investigated context. University students (N=56) attending the grades of Pedagogy (N=25) and Nursing (N=31) filled in two questionnaires at the end of the lesson of the course: The Revised SPQ-2F Study Process Questionnaire and AEQ Assessment Experience Questionnaire were used to measure the approaches to learning and perceptions of the assessment practice. First questionnaire was concerned the students’ approaches towards their own learning. Second questionnaire covered general perceptions of assessment demands including the eportfolio assessment. The results showed positive relationship of the use of eportfolio activities with feedback, the training with eportfolios and the positive influence on student teachers’ deep approaches to learning.

Keywords: Assessment, Competences, eportfolio, Feedback, Higher Education, Learning Approaches

INTRODUCTION

Today’s higher education is looking for the development and implementation of teaching practices, learning environments and new modes of assessment that enable students to be better prepare to face the challenges of an emerging postmodern society. In order to reach these goals, learning should be in congruence with assessment (Segers, Dochy, Cascallar, 2003). It is said, students’ should demonstrate the skills to acquire their knowledge efficiently, think critically, analyse, synthesise and make inferences, the ability to solve novel and complex problems, communication skills, reciprocity and teamwork; characteristics of a deep study approach to learning (Barnett et al., 2001; Segers, Dochy, & Cascallar, 2003; Tynjälä, 1999). The concept of deep study approach implies that the student is driven by an intrinsic motiva-
tion to seek meaning and understanding and to integrate the different aspects of a task into a whole. By the other side, the concept of surface approach to learning refers to develop a task without seeking for further connections, meaning or the implication of what is learned. In this case students tend to learn by memorizing and reproducing the content of the study material.

Complementary to the study of the approaches to learning, it has been demonstrated that the most contextual variables that influence students’ approaches to learning is the assessment method (Scouller, 1998). Students turn their surface and deep approaches to learning to be able to cope with the assessment conditions of their lessons (Gijebels & Dochy 2006). Overall, it is claimed that the effects of the assessment on students’ learning are mediated by the students’ perceptions of these assessment demands. Some studies have presented empirical evidence for the relation between students’ perceptions of assessment and their approaches to learning (e.g., Tiwari & Tang, 2003; Scouller 1998; Segers, Nijhuis & Gijselaers, 2006) and some other studies have shown that students who generally use surface approaches have great difficulty adapting to assessment requirements that favour deep study approaches (Martin & Ramsden, 1987; Marton & Säljö, 1976; Ramsden, 1984; Van Rossum & Schenk, 1984). Additionally, the nature of deep learning seen from the perspective of the student and the assessment demands are related with students’ actions and decisions towards the activities and evaluation settled in form of explicit goals and its alignment with assessment. This can be described as the characteristics of the learning environment that can change a student learning approach whether it is done consciously or subconsciously according with the assessment demands that the student has been exposed. According, several studies (e.g., Kyndt, E. 2011; Kyndt, 2012; Gijebels, Cohertjens, and Vanhournout, 2009; Heikkila, Niemivirta, and Nieminen, 2011; Rosario, Nuñez, González, 2010; Baeten et al. 2010) have analysed students’ approaches to learning towards deep meaningful learning in regards of different factors that can promote this kind of approach, some findings have pointed out the use of learning tasks that allow a true reciprocity of new forms of reasoning.

Consequently, the aim of this study is to describe students’ learning by means of their approaches to learning and their experiences with conventional and non-conventional assessment. The latter applied through eportfolio using a strategy framed within characteristics of assessment including per-assessment, self-assessment, feedback, time and workload of task and reflection. The study have been developed around the fact that knowing how students can relate with their approach to learning and their assessment preference may offer insights about the quality of the learning experience they have been able to develop.

**FRAMEWORK**

**Factors Influencing Approaches to Learning**

The concept of approaches to learning has been studied under different conditions. One of the major concerns relies on the fact that the approaches to learning may vary depending on the characteristics of the learning environment, the type of designed instruction used with the students and the characteristics of the students. In this regard, Struyven, Dochy, Janssens, and Gielen (2006) have argued that students don’t have constant characteristics. Instead, the relation between the learner and the environment determines them. Also, Wilson and Fowler (2005) evidenced that the characteristics of the students’ approaches to learning vary according with the type of learning intervention; for instance, an action learning design can turn surface learners into deeper learners.

On the other hand, various researchers have analysed numerous factors influencing the way students perceive learning (e.g., Gijebels, Van de Watering, Dochy, & Van den Bossche, 2005). These factors have shown as encouraging or discouraging to the students’ approaches to learning. The literature review study of (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, Dochy, 2010) has classified...
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